

The Days of Martin Luther King Jr.

Assassin's Bullet Creates a Martyr

Second in a Series

By Jim Bishop

The hour was 9 a.m., and the wall in front of the two-story Lorraine Motel in Memphis was gray and gray-black with last night's storm. The car entrance at the left was designed so that guests could enter or leave by car, but not without passing the little office with the switchboard where Mrs. Lorraine Bailey sat.

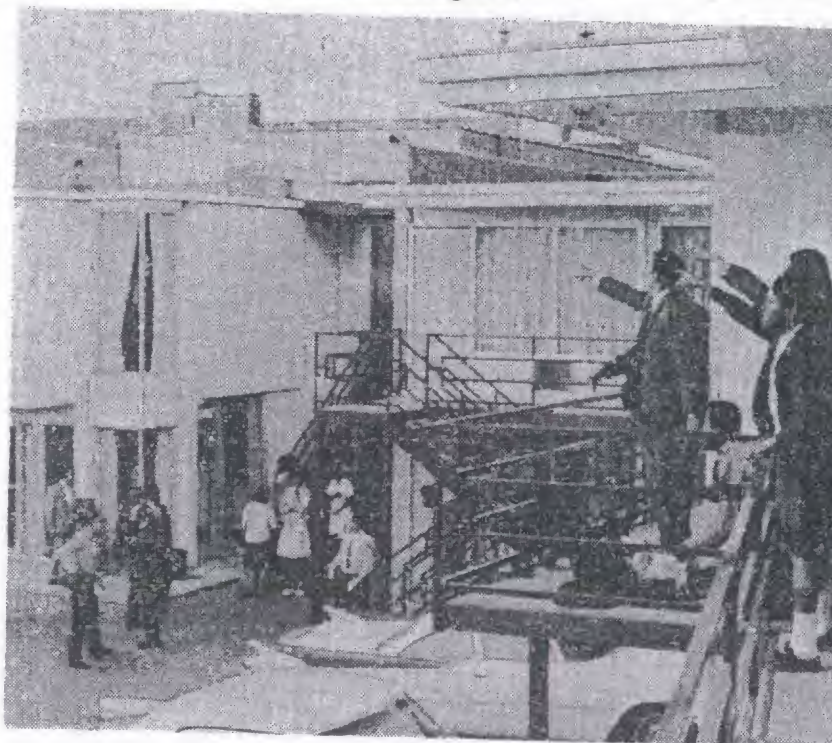
Mrs. Bailey paid special attention to the switchboard light on Room 306. If Martin Luther King Jr. lifted that telephone, Lorraine Bailey wanted to be ready—all other calls would have to wait.

Dr. King came out of the bathroom of floor 306 unshaved. His bodyguard and companion, Bernard Lee, was wandering up and down visiting rooms, trying to re-

assure the staff (before King called them) that matters would go much easier this time in Memphis, even though "Doc's" mood was down. Someway, somehow, they were going to have to assure him and reassure him.

The staff sat in Room 306 and reassurance expired with King's opening words: "Some of my staff are committed to violence, and they will have to go." The black faces looked at one another in consternation. For ten minutes, King dwelt upon the patient suffering of Jesus and Gandhi. His followers, especially his staff, must be totally committed to this principle, or America's soul could not be redeemed.

See KING, A18, Col. 1



King aides show where the fatal shot was fired.

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KING, From A1

"Some of you may have a worry," he said. "Not me. I faced the question of death a long time ago." To Abernathy, Lee, and the others, he was proving the opposite. He was now obsessed with death, and they were powerless to ameliorate it.

The Smiler slept late. He had been up until the early hours in the New Rebel, doing whatever he felt was necessary to the accomplishment of his mission. There is no doubt that he had a visitor during the night—even though it cannot be documentarily proved—because he was not a man to sit up all night looking at street maps and reexamining a rifle. The Smiler was indolent and ignorant; he would need someone to tell him where to go to do the thing he had to do.

He checked out of the New Rebel at noon and cruised the city in the Mustang. He must have passed the Lorraine; he may even have read the room numbers on the second floor until he found "306." A stupid man works twice as hard as an intelligent one to achieve success.

Ray may have been alone. His employer may have been with him. It was imperative that the neighborhood be studied with care. Main Street must have seemed ideal. The rooming house was a cheap no-questions-asked, cash-in-advance place. Any room in the back would look east at the Lorraine. A chair, some patience. An easy assignment.

At the sound of footsteps, Mrs. Bessie Brewer emerged from her room near the desk. It was her rooming house, and she had been long accustomed to the unwashed drunks trying to find the \$1.25 for a roof and a mattress. She looked up at the man in surprise. He was not a drifter.

He was taken back past the desk and down a dingy hall. When they came to 5-B, Mrs. Brewer said it was the only room she had vacant in the back. The Smiler wanted to know what that door was, all the way back, at the head of an alley stairway. That, said Mrs. Brewer, was the bathroom. Ray nodded.

The Smiler looked up and

down the dim hallway. He took his rifle and his binoculars and went into the bathroom at the back of the house. Inside, Ray found a single window. It straddled the right edge of the old-fashioned tub and the floor. He stood in the tub, raised the window partway, and found that by crouching a little, he could see the motel porch more clearly. There was also a ledge which could be used as an ideal rest for a rifle. Standing in the tub, he watched black men move in and out of Room 306.

He must have realized that there would not be this much traffic unless Dr. King was in the room. A life of failures confronted a life of successes.

Room 306 was pretty full. The Rev. Dr. King was almost finished dressing. Hosea Williams was there. So was Ralph Abernathy, James Bevel, Jesse Jackson, and Andy Young.

Sam Kyles, who had said five to ensure arrival at

home for dinner by six, walked out of the room and stood a few steps down on the stairwell. The Rev. Andrew Young left and walked down the stairway to stand beside the big car and the chauffeur. Ben Branch, the leader of the Operation Breadbasket band, walked over to the car with Jesse Jackson.

Dr. King opened the door and started out. "Wait a minute," Abernathy said, "I forgot my after-shave lotion." King walked to the railing and looked down. It was a relaxed moment.

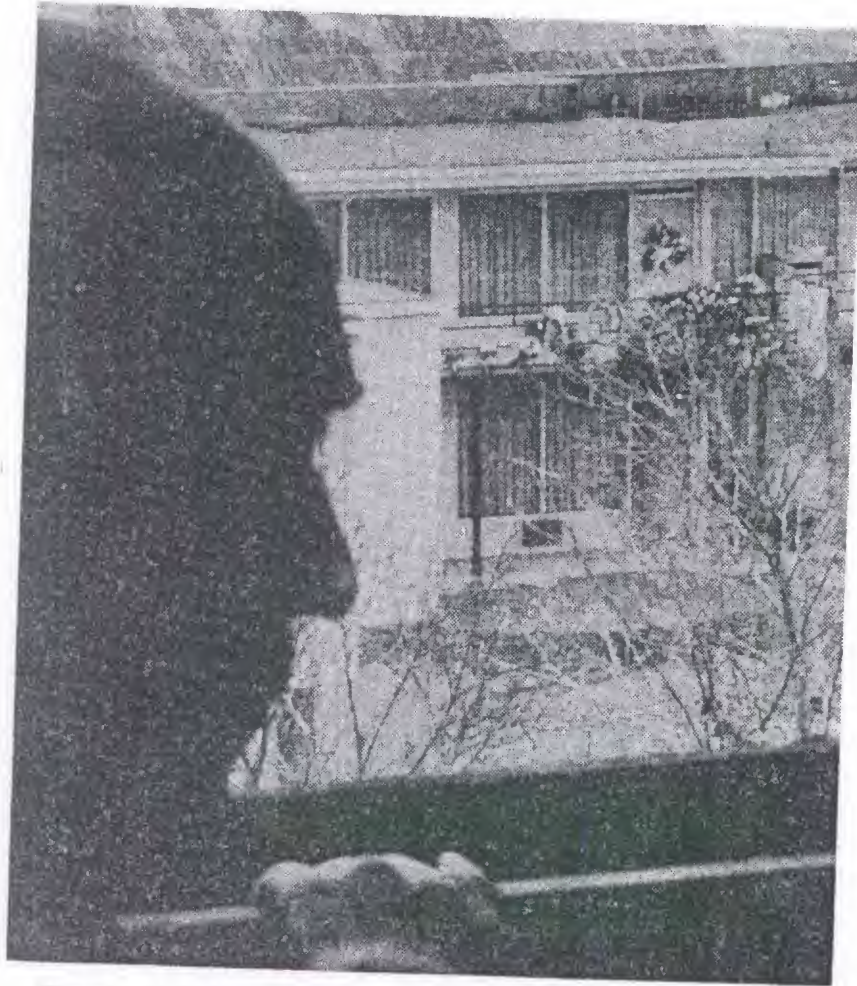
Bernard Lee cut in to tell Dr. King that it was chilly, that he ought to wear a topcoat. King made a move to go back into 306, then changed his mind. He had a thought, and he didn't want to forget it. "Ben," he said, "make sure you play 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand.' Play it real pretty for me."

Abernathy was in the doorway, still patting his cheeks with cologne, when Jesse Jackson, looking up at

King, said, "Oh, Doc . . ."

There was a cracking sound like two flat boards being slapped together. The bullet traveled at 2,600 feet per second. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. neither heard anything nor felt anything. The bullet hit Dr. King a half inch below the right side of his lip, shattered his jaw, kept moving downward and to the left, hit the top of the trachea, and embedded itself in the spine at the bottom of the neckline, severing the spinal cord. Death, in such cases, is almost instantaneous.

Kyles, halfway down the stairway, was the first to realize that Dr. King had been shot. He hurried back up as others below automatically turned their heads toward the origin of the sound—the rooming houses behind the weedy backyard. The white man in 308, James Laue of the Justice Department, who was, in effect, the government's polite shadow, hurried out of his room and stared at the tarpaulin-cov-



Flowers mark the balcony of Room 306, Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was shot.

ered swimming pool. He thought the shot had come from there.

In the courtyard, someone began to moan, "Lord, Lord!" Dr. Abernathy heard it and got to his feet and rushed out, just as Kyles was rushing in, looking for a big turkish towel. Abernathy saw the hole in King's face and yelled: "Call an ambulance!"

The gold Nobel Prize watch on Dr. King's wrist felt the slam of the shot at 6:04 p.m. and survived, ticking off the seconds firmly and correctly.

Ray was in no mood to linger. He picked up gun and binoculars and came out of the bathroom with both wrapped in a newspaper. Roomer Willy Anchues came out of his bedroom just in time to confront the murderer. James Earl Ray had paused in his room for a rifle was inside a dirty moment. The Remington green bedspread. In the same hand, he held a small blue travel bag with his soiled underwear, a shaving kit, a cake of soap, and the binoculars.

Anchues said, "That sounded like a shot."

Ray was calm and smiling. "Yes," he said, "it was." He continued down the hall and walked on down to the street.

He must have known that his fingerprints were on file in several places, including FBI headquarters, and he should have realized that his prints were all over the gun, the shaving cream jar, the binoculars. Still, he turned left, walked a few steps to a storefront with a recessed window, and dropped everything there. In this he was following the patten of stupidity which had plagued his life of crime.

The time in Atlanta was an hour later: 7:13 p.m. The phone rang. It was Jesse Jackson. "Coretta," he said "Doc's been shot."

Mrs. King was silent for a moment. These were the words she knew might be heard at any time. "Is he dead?" she whispered.

"No," Jesse Jackson said. "I don't know, but if I was you, I'd get the first flight out of Atlanta."

Mrs. King phoned her husband's secretary, Dora McDonald, and asked her to come over at once. She turned on the television, and by now regular programming had been preempted by the news about the shooting, although no one knew whether the wound was fatal or even serious. Coretta King was phoning Juanita Abernathy, explaining that she had tickets for the 8:25 p.m. flight to Memphis, in case Mrs. Abernathy wanted to join her.

She did not notice that her children had come in to the room. They heard their father's name mentioned, and they crouched in front of the set. When she got off the phone, the boys asked, "What happened? What is it?"

Yoki, the eldest, ran weeping from the room, screaming. "Don't tell me! Don't tell me!"

Mrs. King called her back, took a deep breath, and assumed her controlled manner. "I'm getting ready to go to Memphis," she said, "because your daddy has been shot."

She said no more. The children accepted her calm attitude and assumed it as their own.

Lillie Hunter years earlier had been Dr. King's secretary. Lillie Hunter was shoving end tables against the sides of a sofa in her apartment when her daughter Jackie said, "Did you hear? Dr. King's been shot." The shocked woman got in her car and drove to the King home.

Mayor Ivan Allen and his police captain hurried up the front porch and asked the women to hurry. Lillie Hunter and Dora McDonald got into the car with Mrs. King and Mrs. Abernathy. The car sped down the hill and across Atlanta to the airport.

When they arrived a clerk

said to Lillie Hunter, "The Memphis manager just phoned Dr. King died." There was disbelief on her face.

Mrs. Hunter asked Mrs. King and Dora to step out of the car and accompany her to the airport ladies' room. The mayor followed them and stood inside the doorway. Mrs. King seemed apprehensive. Lillie looked at her beseechingly. "Your husband," she said firmly, then paused. "Your husband has passed on." Coretta King stood, head up, tilted a little back.

"I don't think I'll go to Memphis," she said. "I'll go home to the children."

When a group of Black Panthers in Los Angeles heard the flash on radio, they got together to discuss the apocalypse. The time to burn America to the ground had come.

It didn't happen. Rioting occurred in 130 cities. The toll was \$130,000,000 in dam-

age—mostly in black sections—and 34 Negroes and 5 whites would be dead within the span of one day.

There would be a summing up, by the right, the left, and the middle this day. Yet, as a Martyr on this night of April 4, 1968, he

was closer to success than in life because, for the first time, he pinched the conscience of all. He had been overtaken by the darkness he feared most, and now he would be sanctified—parks and boulevards and playgrounds would be named for

him. The man who, in life, had been looked upon as a Satan of municipal trouble, had become the Black Christ.

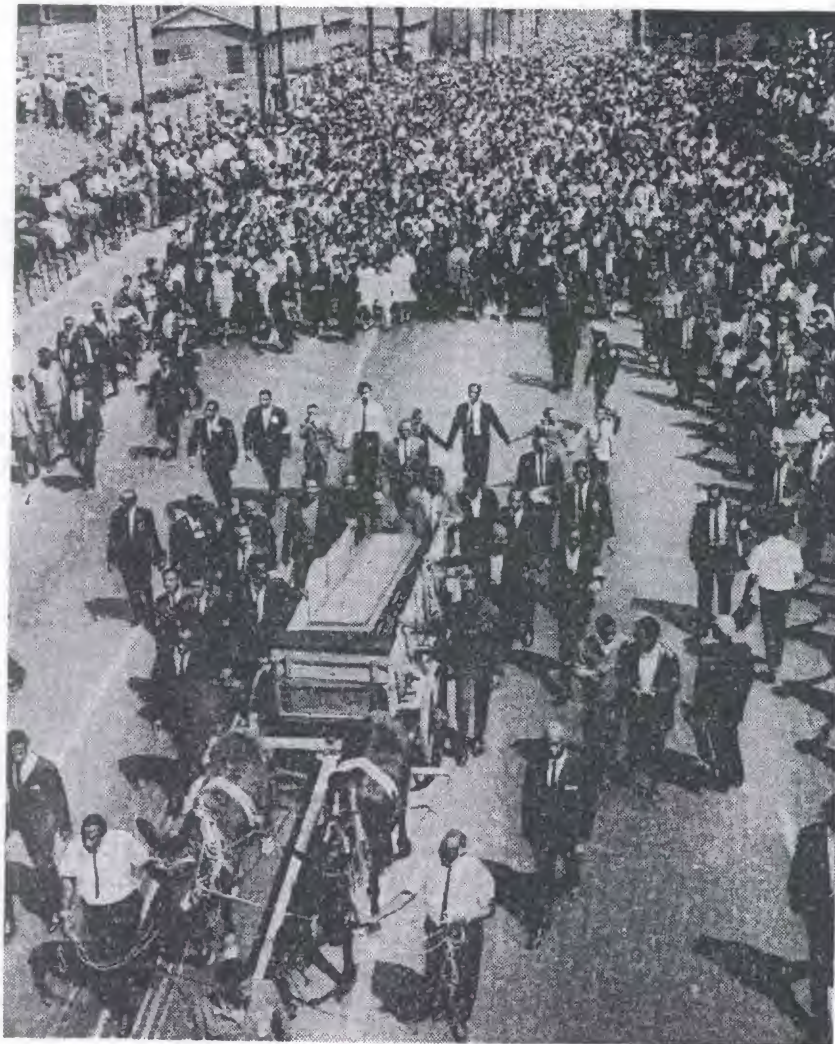
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Next: The beginning.



Washington Post Staff Photo

Coretta King: "I don't think I'll go to Memphis. I'll go home to the children."



Associated Press

Thousands mourned Dr. King's death on a four-mile march from Ebenezer Baptist

Church to Morehouse College, Atlanta. His body was borne on a mule-drawn wagon.

King Observances

A weekend of observances of the birthday of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. continued yesterday here and around the nation as the Rev. Walter E. Fauntroy spoke at Dr. King's home church in Atlanta.

Speaking at Ebenezer Baptist Church on the 43d anniversary of the birth of the slain civil rights leader, Fauntroy, the District's nonvoting delegate and a former associate of Dr. King, said that the radical young and vocal poor are continuing Dr. King's message.

In one of the observances held here yesterday, the Cardozo Jaycees sponsored a memorial symposium in the Cannon House Office Building on the "manifestation

Meanwhile in Philadelphia, Mayor Frank L. Rizzo proclaimed yesterday "Martin Luther King Day" in his city and observances were staged in a number of other cities, including Memphis, where Dr. King was killed April 4, 1968.

A memorial breakfast was to be held at the Pitts Motor Hotel here at 8 a.m. today and there is to be a service at the Washington Cathedral at 7 p.m.
